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MAY 9, 1950  
621th BROADCAST

# Town Meeting



BULLETIN OF AMERICA'S TOWN MEETING OF THE AIR

Broadcast by Stations of the American Broadcasting Co.



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## Is the American Press Doing Its Job Today?

*Moderator, GEORGE V. DENNY, Jr.*

### *Speakers*

**JAMES B. RESTON**

**DON HOLLENBECK**

*(See also page 12)*

### COMING

— May 16, 1950 —

**To What Extent Is Government Responsible  
for Social Welfare?**

— May 30, 1950 —

**What Progress May We Expect in the Next  
Half Century?**

Published by THE TOWN HALL, Inc., New York 18, N. Y.

VOLUME 16, NUMBER 2  \$4.50 A YEAR: 10c A COPY



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### THE BROADCAST OF MAY 16:

#### **"To What Extent Is Government Responsible for Social Welfare?"**



### THE BROADCAST OF MAY 30:

#### **"What Progress May We Expect in the Next Half Century?"**



The Broadcast of May 9, 1950, originated at City College, New York, from 9:00 to 9:30 p.m., DST, under the auspices of the English Department of the College of the City of New York over the American Broadcasting Company Network.

Town Meeting is published by The Town Hall, Inc., Town Meeting Publication Office: 400 S. Front St., Columbus 15, Ohio. **Send subscriptions and single copy orders to Town Hall, New York 18, N. Y.** Subscription price, \$4.50 a year. 10c a copy. Entered as second-class matter, May 9, 1942, at the Post Office at Columbus, Ohio, under the Act of March 3, 1879.

# Town Meeting

BULLETIN OF AMERICA'S TOWN MEETING OF THE AIR

GEORGE V. DENNY, JR., MODERATOR



MAY 9, 1950

VOL. 16, No. 2

## Is the American Press Doing Its Job Today?

### Announcer:

Tonight your Town Meeting is proud to be associated with the English Department of the College of the City of New York in its annual John H. Finley series of public lectures. This is part of CCNY's discussions on the service of the Nation's press dedicated to the late John Finley, former president of the College and editor of the *New York Times*.

Town Meeting is always happy to coöperate with discussion groups and community forums such as these, and we've originated many programs under the auspices of local lecture series in all parts of the country.

Sometimes you may wonder just how you can help further the Town Meeting idea of free discussion. One way is to organize a local discussion group or community Town Meeting. You can start by gathering some of your friends to listen to these Tuesday night broadcasts, and having your own discussion after we go off the air. If you'd like suggestions about forming your own Town Meeting, we'll be happy to hear from you. Just write to Town Hall, New York 18, New York.

Now to preside over our discussion here is your Moderator, the president of Town Hall, and founder of America's Town Meeting, George V. Denny, Jr. Mr. Denny. (Applause)

### Moderator Denny:

Good evening, neighbors. Tonight we are delighted to join with the College of the City of New York in this memorial meeting to one of its former presidents, Dr. John H. Finley,

who for years was editor of the *New York Times*. I'm sure he would approve heartily of tonight's discussion. Our question, though, needs a bit of defining.

When we ask, "Is the American Press Doing Its Job Today?" your mind immediately jumps to the front pages, Senator McCarthy's charges before the Senate Committee to Mr. Hoover's proposal to eliminate the Russians from the U. N., to the case of the Bing Crosbys, and the opinions of the columnists on particular issues in which you are interested. Or you may think only of the sports pages and the comic strips.

So when we ask, "Is the press doing its job today?" what we mean is it doing a good job or a bad job, an accurate or an inaccurate reporting of the news of the day, a fair or unfair interpretation of the meaning of the news.

Does the press report what is really happening or only what is sensational or the things that are sensationally stated?

There's another question that seems to us here at Town Hall to override all of these issues, and which applies to all media of communication, including radio. Does the press today accept and attempt to fulfill a responsibility for helping the American people to find the right answer to the problem of survival in a world in which we have, in our own hands, the means of our own destruction?

We've asked two experts in the field of journalism to help us find the answer, Don Hollenbeck, news analyst and radio commentator, and James B. Reston, diplomatic correspondent for the *New York Times*.

We'll hear first from Mr. Hollenbeck, who has filled various assignments in this field, has been a foreign correspondent, and who is known to many of us for his searching analysis on the radio of the press of this country and the world. Mr. Hollenbeck. (Applause)

### **Mr. Hollenbeck:**

Certainly in some respects the American press is doing a monumental job, as almost any publisher will be quick to tell you. Circulation was never so high in history. More people than ever before have access to the daily newspaper.

As a purveyor of entertainment and superficial information on a mass scale, the American press has no equal anywhere. But the question we must ask first is what is the job of the press. As Mr. Denny implied, that job today—the job of a medium of information—is more than a job of purveying entertainment and superficial information.

As never before in history, the people should be looking to the press for leadership and example, for honesty in reporting, and for more than honesty, for interpretation and assistance in solving the problems that have multiplied as the world has shrunk.

Is the American press doing that job?

From this corner the answer must be that it's not doing it adequately, although certainly conscientious newspapermen are more than ever aware of their larger responsibilities.

But the big, fat, successful, rich, and dominant newspapers in the United States are not the newspapers which take most seriously their responsibility to their communities, which devote the major part of their resources and efforts to the admittedly complex job of presenting news and issues and, more important, the backgrounds and explanations of those issues in the news. Not much!

It's the newspapers with the most and best comics; the newspapers with the flashy, sensational presentation; the newspapers which entertain, titillate, attack, amuse, and horrify; which use the biggest type and the most pictures; which are the successful newspapers if you look at it from the standpoint of circulation and the counting house.

And who is to criticize success? Certainly the newspaper-buying public doesn't seem to be too critical.

In this country there are newspapers which are keenly aware of their responsibilities, but they're all too few, and what they do tends to get lost in the shuffle.

Now for a story which seems to me to contain the essence of the problem of the press today. The other day the Pulitzer Prizes for 1949 were announced, and at the thought of a Pulitzer Prize almost any newspaperman gets a faraway look in his eyes. These annual awards of merit in journalism and other fields are as highly respected as any arbitrary awards can be. The possessor of one is a man of distinction in the best sense of the word, and I bow to Mr. Reston on that. He won one in 1945.

Two newspapers this time won awards in the field of meritorious public service—the *St. Louis Post Dispatch* and the *Chicago Daily News*. Their reporters had done one of the best news stories in a long time. Their investigation had shown that in the State of Illinois, 51 newspaper editors had been on the state pay roll for a number of years, and that the job done by these editors in exchange for more than \$450,000 in public funds was, to put it politely, hardly worth the money.

And there was the larger issue involved: the issue of supposedly impartial molders of public opinion being paid off by a political machine, whether they were guilty or not or actually prostituting their news columns to that machine.

In announcing the Pulitzer Prizes the other day the *New York Times* said, and I quote, "The abuses uncovered arouse nationwide attention."

Well, it was scarcely because the rest of the newspapers of the country got excited that any nationwide attention was aroused, because that story of major importance, of such tremendous implications, almost didn't get out of St. Louis and Chicago at all. For nearly two weeks, not a word appeared about it elsewhere, and, when the press associations and the rest of the newspapers did catch up with it, the coverage was spotty in the extreme.

As the *Post Dispatch* said, there's been a good deal of discussion about the gulf between the American press and the people, and the Illinois revelation will widen that gulf.

We must expect of the American press in these critical times the utmost in honesty, integrity, and thorough discussion. It's somewhat discouraging that, when it comes to its own soiled linen, the American press is so reluctant to let the neighbors see it out on the line. And it's supremely ironical that one of journalism's richest prizes is awarded for the hanging out of some of that soiled linen. (Applause)

### **Moderator Denny:**

Thank you, Don Hollenbeck. James B. Reston is no diplomatic correspondent for the *New York Times*. You undoubtedly remember his series on the Dumbarton Oaks Security Conference, which won him a Pulitzer Prize in 1945 for his "distinguished example of telegraphic reporting of national affairs published in daily newspapers in the United States." Town Meeting is happy once again to present Scott Reston. (Applause)

### **Mr. Reston:**

Mr. Chairman, asking whether the American press is doing its job is a little like asking, "Are girls pretty?" Some of them are, and some of them are awful.

There are some questions that can be answered without long windup, but this isn't one of them. If I asked this City College audience whether Nat Holman was doing his job as basketball coach at City College, I suppose I'd get a fair

clear answer. The newspaper question, however, is a little tougher.

Some newspapers this morning, for example, thought that the Supreme Court's decision about the right of people to think what they please in spite of Senator McCarthy was front-page stuff. Others thought that the great historical event of the day was a report—which was later denied—that Bing Crosby was having trouble with his wife. Therefore, if you don't mind, I won't try to generalize too much.

Don Hollenbeck has, I think, asked the right question: What exactly is the job of the American press today?

Before I throw the Constitution at you, let me put it simply. Our job is to report what happens. Not just the part of it we like, but the part we don't like, or as much of it as we can with newsprint at a hundred dollars a ton. Not just Lattimore or McCarthy, but both of them—if you can stand it. Not just Acheson in London, and Truman in the West, but Bevin, and Stalin in Moscow, as well.

Mr. Chairman, our job is not only to report what happens, but to put it in some proportion. A newspaper has only so much space. It gets far more information than it can print. It can either keep before the people the major events that affect their lives, or it can divert them from that news.

When Mr. Thomas Jefferson and various other gentlemen were establishing the Constitution, they did a lot of hard thinking before they forbade the Congress to pass any laws infringing on the freedom of the press.

They did not provide this privilege to the press in order to protect the rights of newspapers to entertain their readers, obviously.

The idea in their minds, as I understand it, was that the people would, in the long run, have to decide what was to be done in this country. They also said it was the job of the press, among others, to see that the people got reliable, complete information on which to base those judgments.

One hundred and fifty years ago, the kind of information that was necessary in this country was how to build a road, how to purify a spring, and, roughly, what the British and the French and other people were doing.

Now, however, our security and the security of many other peoples depend on our judgments about what is going on in French Indo-China, London, Peiping, and a lot of other places, including Washington.

Is the American press doing this job well? I don't think it's

doing it as well as it ought to be, or as well as it could. But I would assert that it's doing a better job than any other press in the world.

Like all our institutions, including the colleges, if I may say so, it is suffering from a hangover from an era when the role of this country was less decisive than it is today. It is, however, in my judgment, making progress, and, I think, it will continue to grow in responsibility and in reliability.

I would like, however, in closing to stress this point. The rate of this progress will depend, in my judgment, to a very large extent on the public demand for reliable and serious information. We are not discussing here a radio quiz program where the people who give the right answers necessarily get the biggest prizes. The founding fathers set the principles, perhaps, for the newspaper business, but they don't buy the newspapers today.

If the people want information rather than mere entertainment, there are, I think, a few newspapers around that will accommodate them, and I can even think of at least one paper I'm prepared to recommend.

But if the people want to run away from the serious news which is always harder to read than some other kinds of news, then there is very little that we can do about that.  
(Applause)

### **Moderator Denny:**

Thank you, Scotty Reston. Now there are a great many people gathered in the great hall here at the College of the City of New York who have divided opinions on this question, as we found out in our preliminary meeting tonight. While we get ready for our question period, here's a message for our Town Meeting listeners.

### **Announcer:**

Three weeks from tonight, America's Town Meeting commemorates its fifteenth anniversary. As part of the observance, the American Broadcasting Company will present a special documentary program on Monday night, May 29, from 9:00 to 10:00 Eastern Daylight Time. The documentary will highlight recorded excerpts from memorable Town Meetings of the past fifteen years. You'll hear again such famous discussions as those between Harold Ickes and Frank Gannett, Wendell Willkie and Robert Jackson, Dean Acheson and Verne Marshall.

Mr. Denny himself will be the narrator. Every Town Meeting listener will want to tune in for this thrilling documentary. Make a note now to be sure you hear it—Monday, May 29, 9 to 10 o'clock, Eastern Daylight Time on your ABC station. Consult your local paper for the time in your city.

Remember, too, the Town Meeting 15th Anniversary program will be one hour on May 30. We invite all of you to share these exciting events as Town Meeting completes 15 years on the air.

Now for our question period we return you to Mr. Denny.

## QUESTIONS, PLEASE!

*Mr. Denny:* We start with the gentleman on the aisle over here. Yes?

*Man:* To Don Hollenbeck. What do you think is the responsibility of the reader to the press?

*Mr. Denny:* Ah, that takes an hour's lecture. Go ahead.

*Mr. Hollenbeck:* I'll do it as quickly as I can, Mr. Denny. I think he has a great responsibility, and I think Scotty Reston made that point. I tried to, but it's eventually the public's responsibility. If they want the best newspaper, they can have it. If they don't care, they won't get it.

*Mr. Denny:* Thank you. Now this gentleman in the brown coat.

*Man:* Mr. Reston. In view of the wrong predictions of the press on President Truman in the last election, and the fact that 90 per cent of the press was against President Roosevelt's last term, do you really believe that the press influences public opinion?

*Mr. Reston:* Well, I think it does influence public opinion in various different ways. The implication, I think, of your question is do the American people follow the suggestions of editors who write on the editorial pages. I think the answer to that is probably, "No."

I think you've got to remember, however, that the newspapers do affect public opinion in other ways. Mr. Truman seems to have been able to get his points over to the American people through the presentation of the news.

In the last analysis, what we are talking about are news papers, not papers primarily of opinion. Therefore, I think the answer is "Yes." They do influence public opinion by operating as transmission belts of ideas. I think they are still giving a straight pitch to the American people, in general, in that straight news field.

*Mr. Denny:* Thank you. I'm happy to welcome here tonight the elected head of our first World Town Hall Seminar, Mr. Edith Sampson, who has a question for Mr. Hollenbeck. Yes.

*Mrs. Sampson:* Mr. Hollenbeck, I'm from Chicago, Illinois and I'm rather possessive about my city and my state. Would you tell the audience that the unholy alliance between news men and politicians in Illinois dates back to a previous administration and not our present administration.

*Mr. Hollenbeck:* I'm glad to make that clear. I tried to avoid any reference to any particular administration. Of course we'll let that go on the record. Thank you.

*Mr. Denny:* Thank you. Now the gentleman over here.

*Man:* Mr. James Reston. Why have so many foreign correspondents been forced to write books containing their true opinions which should have been printed in their columns? That is besides earning some extra money?

*Mr. Reston:* Well, I couldn't accept the implication of that. I don't think that they write books because they can't get their views published in the newspapers. I think they write books because they're pretty tired of getting their opinions used as fish wrappers the following day, and they'd like to get something between covers that might last a little longer. I think that is the primary impulse, rather than a desire to publish ideas that they can't get published in their own papers.

*Mr. Denny:* Thank you. The young man back in the hall.

*Man:* Mr. Hollenbeck. Do newspapers have the right to voice judgments on the guilt or innocence of persons on trial?

*Mr. Hollenbeck:* I don't think anyone has the right to pre-judge the guilt or innocence before the issue of a trial is decided. I would say that that's easy to answer.

*Mr. Denny:* All right. The young lady over here.

*Lady:* Mr. Reston. Why aren't rural areas serviced by news services with the most concise but accurate national and foreign news stories?

*Mr. Reston:* I'm sorry, I don't understand that question.

*Lady:* Well, as far as I can see after reading rural newspapers, they get a less accurate idea of national and foreign news stories than the city newspapers, for instance.

*Mr. Reston:* I think I understand now. Well, I think that is one of the major problems in this country at the present time. Since you are distributing news over an entire continent, the tendency is for news to be written in such a way for the press associations that it can be cut and shortened for the use of papers that cannot afford to publish such long dispatches. That tendency toward making dispatches too concise tends, I think, to heighten the more dramatic aspects of stories, and, therefore, in the smaller papers perhaps to distort, or give the more sensational bit of the story, rather than the explanation which would be at the tail end of the story.

*Mr. Denny:* Thank you. The young man here.

*Man:* Mr. Hollenbeck. Does a newspaper columnist necessarily have to follow the political policies of the newspaper?

*Mr. Hollenbeck:* I think not. I don't believe Mr. Drew Pearson agrees in many respects with all the newspapers which he represents. That would be a very difficult job, and Mr. Pearson would be a very unhappy man if he tried to do that. *(Laughter)*

*Mr. Denny:* Thank you. The young lady.

*Lady:* Mr. Reston. Isn't it true that a small minority of vested interests control the power of the press to bring their biased views to the majority?

*Mr. Reston:* No, I don't believe so. I think that we've got many problems in the press, but, I think, the days when the owners of papers could merely dictate to the editors what should be published in the papers have long since gone by.

You can undoubtedly point to a few papers where the publisher does undoubtedly influence, and even dictate, the substance of what is in his paper each morning. But I think that is a very, very small minority of the American papers today.

*Mr. Denny:* Thank you, Mr. Reston. Now the gentleman way in the back of the hall. Mr. Hollenbeck.

*Man:* *(Question indistinguishable.)*

*Mr. Hollenbeck:* I don't know who makes the suggestion but it's obviously ridiculous.

*Mr. Denny:* We didn't hear that question. Come down, please. The microphone must be dead there. He can't get it. We're not getting it over the radio.

*Man:* Should the American press be subjected to some phase of governmental control? What's your opinion on this subject?

*Mr. Hollenbeck:* I don't think any form of government

control of any medium of information, of course, is the answer except that certain principles of conduct have got to be adhered to and there are always agencies prepared to do that. But censorship which that implies, of course, is not the answer.

*Mr. Denny:* Next question in the front row.

*Man:* Mr. Reston. I'd like to shift overseas for a moment. How would you try to improve our Government's program "Voice of America," etc., to pierce the Iron Curtain with knowledge?

*Mr. Reston:* Oh, brother, that one is really a tough one. I don't have any technical knowledge. I'm told at the present time that there is a movement on in London. Indeed, during the present London Conference that will be one of the topics of discussion as to how we can beat the Soviet system of jamming the "Voice of America" and the BBC. There will be some attempt to mass transmitters, and try to get through in that way. That's a technical subject which Mr. Hollenbeck might be able to answer, but I can't.

*Mr. Denny:* I'm sorry I let that question go by at all, because that isn't really on tonight's subject. It's a very good question but it ought to be on a subject on radio or communications. We'll take this question from the gentleman here.

## THE SPEAKERS' COLUMN

**JAMES BARRETT RESTON**—James Reston, diplomatic correspondent for the *New York Times*, was born in Clydebank, Scotland, in 1909, and brought to the United States in 1910. He attended the Vale of Leven Academy in Alexandria, Scotland; the public schools of Dayton, Ohio, and the University of Illinois.

Following a year on the Springfield, Ohio, *Daily News*, Mr. Reston worked in the publicity department of Ohio State University. In 1934, he was publicity director for the Cincinnati Baseball Club.

From 1934 to 1937, Mr. Reston was a reporter for the Associated Press in New York City and, from 1937 to 1939, in London. In 1939, he became a reporter for the *New York Times* in the London Bureau, and since 1941, has been with the Washington Bureau.

In 1945, Mr. Reston was awarded the Pulitzer prize for national correspondence. In addition to his newspaper writing, he is the author of *Prelude to Victory*.

**DON HOLLENBECK**—Born in Lincoln, Nebraska, in 1905, Don Hollenbeck attended the University of Nebraska. His talents as a writer and journalist are currently put to good use as a news analyst and radio commentator. He is also popular as a lecturer.

*Man:* Mr. Hollenbeck, what are the prospects for getting newspapers all over the United States published primarily as educational media not as profit-making businesses, often serving propaganda interests?

*Mr. Hollenbeck:* I think it's a very slim opportunity, as long as the newspaper is a business, and quite properly so. A man's in the newspaper business to make money. He has a perfect right to be there. He has a perfect right to put out a medium of entertainment as well, and I hope that anything I have said doesn't detract from that.

He does also, in addition to his responsibility to himself as a businessman, have a growing responsibility to put out more information and interpretation, and the entertainment should become secondary. But he certainly has a perfect right to his newspaper as a business enterprise and as a money-making enterprise.

*Mr. Denny:* Mr. Hollenbeck, you might say that when Town Meeting gets as many listeners as Jack Benny, then we can have that kind of newspaper, too. All right, on the aisle.

*Lady:* I'd like to ask Mr. Reston. How do you think serious news can best be popularized?

*Mr. Reston:* Well, I think this is one of our major problems because the good have a way of being insufferably dull. It is, however, I think a very limited thing that you can do. I think you've got to start with the realization that, with the complex issues that we have before this country at the present time, it is exceedingly difficult to make them as interesting as the Crosby case.

So long as readers insist on preferring the frivolous to the much more serious that problem will exist. But I agree with the implication of the question, that it is a problem that we've got constantly to try to beat.

*Mr. Denny:* Thank you. Now this gentleman here.

*Man:* Mr. Hollenbeck. Is there enough of diversification of opinion in the newspapers of the United States today?

*Mr. Hollenbeck:* Is there enough diversification of opinion? I think there is plenty of diversification of opinion. It's among the public I believe that we must see that diversification and the public must make its wishes known if we are to get the kind of newspapers we need. The newspapermen in America are the best newspapermen in the world. You can't beat them.

*Mr. Denny:* Thank you. Next question.

*Man:* Mr. Reston. How would you compare British press coverage with American press coverage?

*Mr. Reston:* Did you say press coverage?

*Man:* Right.

*Mr. Reston:* Well, I think you've got in Britain today exaggeration all the way along the line, an exaggeration of our good qualities and an exaggeration of our bad qualities. You have in papers like the *Manchester Guardian* and the *Times* of London superb coverage of serious matters with explanatory articles thrown in. But I would say that the over-all edge certainly goes to the coverage of this country. There is more tendency toward, and a larger percentage of opinion put into the news columns, I think, in Britain than is true in this country.

*Mr. Denny:* Thank you. The young man over here.

*Man:* Mr. Hollenbeck. Do you think that the press today is guilty of fomenting hysteria in order to make American people accept a Third World War?

*Mr. Hollenbeck:* No, I think that's much too sweeping statement. I wouldn't go along with that at all.

*Mr. Denny:* Mr. Reston, would you like to comment on that question?

*Mr. Reston:* No, I thoroughly agree with Don Hollenbeck. There may be an unconscious tendency to play up the exciting information, rather than the more studied, the more serious information, but I think it is preposterous to suggest that that is being done by some clique for the purpose of fomenting and getting this country into another war.

*Mr. Denny:* Thank you, Mr. Reston and thank you, Don Hollenbeck. And thanks also to our host, the City College of the City of New York. Now in just a moment I'll tell you about our subject and speakers for next week.

*Announcer:* Last night your Town Meeting played an important role in welcoming to America the Prime Minister of Pakistan, Liaquat Ali Khan. Town Hall, together with the Foreign Policy Association, was host to a distinguished group of dinner guests at the Waldorf-Astoria.

It was through the Round the World Town Meeting last summer that the American people were first introduced to the Pakistan Prime Minister, who is currently making his first official visit to the United States.

Your Town Meeting continues to bring you the foremost personalities for shaping world history in these crucial times and the Town Meeting Bulletin continues to reflect the reasoned presentations of great leaders on the vital questions of the day. Those who have subscribed to and saved the

Town Meeting Bulletins over the years have a priceless record of which they may be justly proud.

Why not begin tonight with a year's subscription to the Town Meeting Bulletin which you may receive for 52 weeks for \$4.50. Or if you'd like a trial subscription send \$1 for 11 issues to Town Hall, New York 18, New York.

Now to tell you about next week's program, here is Mr. Denny.



# Town Meeting Bulletin

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### VOLUME 16

1. How Should Business and Government Deal With Unemployment?

*Mr. Denny:* Next week, in conjunction with the 17th Biennial Convention of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, our New York sponsors, and Washington sponsors, in Cleveland, Ohio, Congressman Andrew J. Biemiller, Democrat of Wisconsin, and W. W. Vandever, director of the Ashland Oil and Refining Company, will discuss one of the most widely debated questions in the United States today — "To What Extent Is Government Responsible for Social Welfare?"

Remember, friends, copies of tonight's Town Meeting, and all Town Meetings will be found in our Town Meeting Bulletin which you may receive regularly for 11 weeks by sending \$1 to Town Hall, New York 18, New York, or for a full year for \$4.50. If you want a copy of tonight's Town Meeting enclosed 10 cents, but allow about two weeks for delivery. Do not send stamps, send coin. So plan to be with us next week and every week at the sound of the Crier's bell. (*Applause*)